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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SUPREME COUNCIL REQUESTS PRESENTATION ON
USG INTERNET TRAINING PROGRAM

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (U) SUMMARY: In USAID's first meeting with Turkmenistan's Supreme Council on Science and Technology on October 18, the Council's Deputy Chairwoman and Department Head for State Science Policy Realization explained the body's role in coordinating the activities of the country's scientific agencies, providing technical expertise in educational technologies, and training scientific cadre. They also discussed its involvement in NATO's Virtual Silk Highway program, which provides high-speed Internet connectivity with European Union (EU) funding for 52 scientific and higher educational institutions across Turkmenistan and briefly outlined its vision for strengthening technological interactions among government institutions. As a next step, the Deputy Chairwoman requested a formal presentation on USAID's Internet Access and Training Program (IATP), which is prepared to expand its current training activities on Internet technologies for civic actors to government officials. Cooperation with the Supreme Council, which has also been tasked by President Berdimuhamedov with reestablishing the Academy of Sciences, presents a good opportunity to expand relations with an entity that will play a key role in expanding access to Internet and other technologies -- apparently with the President's personal support. END SUMMARY.

AN EMERGING PLAYER IN BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S TURKMENISTAN

13. (U) On October 18, USAID/Almaty Democracy and Governance Office Director Kim Delaney and USAID Country Representative Ashley Moretz met with the Supreme Council on Science and Technology under the President of Turkmenistan to discuss opportunities for cooperation. Deputy Chairwoman Akjeren Annanurova provided a brief history of the institution, which was founded in 1993 as a public organization, but was converted to an official government structure in 1995 (NOTE: By statute, the President of Turkmenistan is the Chairman. END NOTE). Earlier this year, the President tasked the Supreme Council with overseeing the reestablishment of the Academy of Sciences. In this role, it will coordinate the work of the country's scientific

agencies and play a leading role in training scientific cadre on the use of emerging technologies.

14. (U) The Deputy Chairwoman identified seven priority sectors for developing and introducing technologies: energy complex (including geology, geophysics and construction); humanitarian (including history, literature and law); agriculture; medicine and science; ecology (including environment and biotechnology); information and communications technology; and economy. Since 2003, the Supreme Council has overseen high-speed Internet connections for the country's higher education institutions via NATO's Virtual Silk Highway project with EU funding. Under this program, Turkmenistan will continue to receive free Internet access through the end of the year, after which time the connection's future is "up to NATO." (COMMENT: Actually, the EU -- not NATO -- currently pays for this connection, and has indicated that it does not intend to extend the current agreement when it expires at the end of this year because it believes Turkmenistan has sufficient resources to pay itself. According to the EU, Turkmenistan can continue participating in this program if it identifies a source of funds. END COMMENT)

15. (U) The Department Head for State Science Policy Realization, Dr. Orazmamed Vasov, elaborated on the Supreme Council's work and the current extent of Internet access in Turkmenistan. Through the Virtual Silk Highway project, Turkmenistan has created a network of 52 scientific organizations across the country, with locations in Ashgabat, Turkmenbashi, Balkanabad, Serdar, Turkmenabad, Dashoguz, Mary and Tejen. Furthermore, he advised that 69 percent of these connections come via fiber-optic cable, 28 percent are served by radio link, and only 3 percent rely on dial-up connections. The prevalence of high-speed access throughout the network affords video-conference capabilities and for the health sector, the opportunity to introduce a platform for telemedicine.

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16. (U) Vasov also shared details of other projects the Supreme Council is considering. First, he would like to start an electronic catalog system for the Central Library, which could provide access by the regions to the library's holdings in the future. Next, a database of dissertations would support the council's activities related to overseeing the issuance of higher education degrees, a role assigned by the president in 2007. Finally, by building on the linkages among health institutions, the council would like to support the introduction of telemedicine.

OPPORTUNITY FOR COOPERATION VIA IATP

17. (SBU) USAID presented another avenue for potential cooperation with the Supreme Council, the Internet Access and Training Program (IATP), implemented by IREX. This regional program has been operating in Turkmenistan since 2000 with State Department funding, but funding and administrative oversight was transferred to USAID in August 2007. The program provides training and Internet access for the general public through a network of six centers across Turkmenistan, but has not concentrated on cooperation with government structures to date. After an overview of possible areas of engagement with IREX, the Deputy Chairwoman requested a presentation by IREX's staff to the Supreme Council to determine concrete proposals since this was the first official meeting between USAID and the Supreme Council. USAID agreed to propose a date for such a presentation via official channels following consultation with IREX.

18. (U) COMMENT: Several informal meetings have taken place previously between IREX and representatives of the Supreme Council, but since they have not been facilitated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this was considered the first "official" meeting. Both representatives of the Supreme Council appeared eager to expand cooperation with the U.S. Government.

19. (U) COMMENT CONTINUED: The Supreme Council is directly subordinate to the President of Turkmenistan, and President Berdimuhamedov was heavily involved in expanding the Virtual Silk Highway to the health sector when he was Minister of Health and Medical Industry. This body is poised to play a key role in the

technological development of higher education and research institutions in Turkmenistan, and expanded relations with the Supreme Council via IATP and other USG programs could provide insights into how -- and how widely -- the President's continuing calls for Internet access will be implemented. END COMMENT.

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